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Bio-Bibliography: Stephen James Meredith Brown (1881-1962)

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Bio-Bibliography: Stephen James Meredith Brown (1881-1962) ¹

Michael R. Hill

STEPHEN JAMES MEREDITH BROWN, S.J., was born in County Down, Ireland, on 24 September 1881. He was educated at Clongowes Wood College and was ordained as a Jesuit in 1914. Brown also pursued studies at Tullabeg, Jersey, Paris, and Hastings. Teaching posts included Clongowes and University College. At the latter, he launched the post-graduate school of librarianship, serving on the faculty for 24 years. Brown founded the Central Catholic Library in 1922 and was its motive force for some four decades. He is remembered today as a major bibliographer of Irish literature.

Sidney Webb (1916)² maintained that Brown (1916) made a significant sociological contribution — as a bibliographer — in providing a detailed compilation of prose fiction concerned with Ireland and all things Irish: *Ireland in Fiction: A Guide to Irish Novels, Tales, Romances, and Folk-Lore*.³ Specifically, Webb asserted, “one can imagine no more valuable ‘source-book’ of Irish sociology than this volume.”

In producing his “source-book,” Brown was in pioneering company. The immediate predecessor to *Ireland in Fiction* was Brown’s (1910) shorter work, *A Readers’ Guide to Irish Fiction*. It appeared on the temporal heels of William I. Thomas’ (1909) better known *Source Book for Social Origins*. Whereas Thomas focused on ethnological materials and bibliographies “for the interpretation of savage society,” Brown hoped to “be useful to the general reader who wishes to study Ireland.” Specifically, Brown (1910) noted in his preface:

The Author’s aim has been to get together and to print in a convenient form a classified list of novels, tales, etc. (whether by Irish or by foreign writers), bearing on Ireland — that is, depicting some phase of Irish life or some episode of Irish history — and to append to each title a short descriptive note.



Stephen J. Brown, S.J.
(Circa 1922)

¹ **SOCIOLOGICAL ORIGINS**, Volume 5, No. 1, Fall 2006: 46-50. All rights reserved. Please visit our free website (www.sociological-origins.com) for additional information and other features. Photograph of Fr Brown courtesy of the Central Catholic Library, Dublin

² The complete text of Webb’s review is reprinted elsewhere in this issue of **SOCIOLOGICAL ORIGINS**, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Fall 2006): 21-24.

³ A complete copy of *Ireland in Fiction: A Guide to Irish Novels, Tales, Romances, and Folk-Lore*, new edition (Brown 1919) is provided as a digital supplement on the CD accompanying this issue of **SOCIOLOGICAL ORIGINS**.

Where Thomas looked fundamentally to the collective past of “savage society,” Brown catalogued materials illuminating the long social march forward into civilized society and modernity. Both Thomas and Brown compiled “source-books,” but each work is distinctive in format and purpose.

What began first as *A Readers' Guide to Irish Fiction* (Brown 1910) grew to become *Ireland in Fiction* (Brown 1916). Most of the first edition of *Ireland in Fiction*, however, was “destroyed by fire in the course of the Rising in Dublin at Easter, 1916” and only a few copies survived. Brown’s (1919) expanded, second edition included “nearly five hundred and fifty entirely new notes on books and authors.” The second edition is an enduring work and has been reprinted by Barnes & Noble (1969), the Irish University Press (1969), B. Franklin (1970), and Royal Carbery Books (1985). A further update, compiled by Brown and completed by a colleague, Desmond Clarke, was issued posthumously in 1985 as *Ireland in Fiction: A Guide to Irish Novels, Tales, Romances and Folklore*, Vol. 2.

Sidney Webb (1916) argued that novels deserve serious sociological consideration, “It is time that a stand was made on behalf of the value, as scientific material, of works of fiction,” and, further, that:

In the hundred thousand or so of extant novels in the English language, to say nothing of the contributions of France, Germany, Russia, and Italy — there is buried a vast amount of observation and criticism, not only, as we are accustomed to say, of “human nature,” but also of its social environment at all ages and in all parts of the world.

For Webb, novels — taken collectively — were the essence of “descriptive sociology.” In so writing, he echoed the earlier conclusion by Harriet Martineau in *How to Observe Morals and Manners* (1838) that:

The eloquence of institutions and records, in which the action of the nation is embodied and perpetuated, is more comprehensive and more faithful than that of any variety of individual voices. The voice of a whole people goes up in the silent workings of an institution; the condition of the masses is reflected from the surface of a record. The institutions of a nation — political, religious, or social — put evidence into the observer’s hands as to its capabilities and wants which the study of individuals could not yield in the course of a lifetime. The records of any society, be they what they may, whether architectural remains, epitaphs, civic registers, national music, or any other of the thousand manifestations of the common mind which may be found among every people, afford more information on morals in a day than converse with individuals in a year.

Novels, one of Martineau’s “manifestations of the common mind which may be found among every people,” provided Webb with “the momentary phases of color and human feeling out of which, in unbroken succession, human existence is actually constituted.” Brown (1919) offers a detailed guide to more than 1,700 prose fiction works on Ireland, including the work of Harriet Martineau herself.

Interestingly, Brown accurately perceived Martineau as “a sociologist,” and gave a favorable synopsis of her didactic novel, *Ireland* (Martineau, 1832).⁴ Brown’s (1919) entry on Martineau is a model of concise analysis:

MARTINEAU, Harriet (1802-1876), a distinguished writer, Author of a long series of works on economics, sociology, religion, travel, etc., etc. In her day she was a well-known literary celebrity. She was a Unitarian, but was not without sympathy for Catholicism. Among her numerous works was her series of “Letters from Ireland,”⁵ reprinted from the DAILY NEWS in 1852

1102 — IRELAND, a Tale. 16 mo. Pp. 136. (London: Charles Fox). 1832. Intended as one of a series of illustrating economic conditions. The plot of the tale (concerning a family of the West coast in extreme poverty) is simple, but some of the scenes are highly effective. “No pains have been spared,” says the Author in a preface, “to ascertain the correctness of the data on which my story is constructed.” Shows throughout keen observation, independent thought, and reasonable sympathy. “She (the Author) speaks as a well-wisher to Ireland and an indignant witness of her wrongs.” (*Pref*). She sets forth the reforms which she believes to be needed. The little book well deserves to be reprinted.

It is a major tribute to Martineau’s fair-minded objectivity that her work received this discerning and astute assessment from an Irish Catholic Jesuit.

The inclusiveness of his compilations sometimes placed Brown at odds with the church hierarchy, so far as publication was concerned. When published, Brown’s bibliographic work typically received favorable notice. Sociologically, Brown is an important chronicler of institutionalized literary patterns in Ireland. Not surprisingly, Brown also wrote several works on decidedly religious topics. And, in addition to the many separately issued publications noted below, Brown was also a frequent contributor to scholarly journals, including *Studies*.

Stephen James Meredith Brown died on 5 May 1962, succumbing to the aftermath of injuries suffered in a London traffic accident.

SEPARATELY PUBLISHED WORKS BY STEPHEN J. BROWN

- 1910. *A Readers’ Guide to Irish Fiction*. Dublin: Browne and Nolan; London, New York: Longmans, Green.
- 1912. *A Guide to Books on Ireland. Part 1: Prose Literature, Poetry, Music, and Plays*. (With Joseph Holloway). Dublin: Hodges, Figgis; New York: Longmans, Green; New York, Lemma, 1970.
- 1912. *Historical Ballad Poetry of Ireland*. (Arranged by Mary J. Brown with an introduction by Stephen J. Brown). New York: Longmans, Green.

⁴ A complete copy of Martineau’s *Ireland* is provided as a digital supplement on the CD accompanying this issue of **SOCIOLOGICAL ORIGINS**.

⁵ A complete copy of Martineau’s *Letters from Ireland* is provided as a digital supplement on the CD accompanying this issue of **SOCIOLOGICAL ORIGINS**.

1913. *The Question of Irish Nationality*. (Reprinted from *Studies*). Dublin: Sealy, Bryers & Walker.
1916. *Ireland in Fiction: A Guide to Irish Novels, Tales, Romances, and Folk-Lore*. Dublin, London: Maunsel and Co.
1919. *Ireland in Fiction: A Guide to Irish Novels, Tales, Romances, and Folklore*. New edition. Dublin, London: Maunsel and Co.; Shannon: Irish University Press, 1968; New York: Barnes & Noble, 1969; New York: B. Franklin 1970; Cork: Royal Carbery Books, 1985.
1921. *The Realm of Poetry: An Introduction*. London: Harrap; New York: Macmillan, 1922.
1925. *The Divine Song-Book: A Brief Introduction to the Psalms*. London: Sands; St. Louis: B. Herder, 1926.
1927. *Poetry of Irish History*. (With Mary J. Brown). Dublin: Talbot Press; New York: Stokes.
1927. *The World of Imagery: Metaphor and Kindred Imagery*. London: K. Paul, Trench, Trubner; New York: Haskell House, 1965; New York: Russell & Russell, 1966.
1928. *The Preacher's Library*. London: Sheed & Ward; Clonskeagh: Browne & Nolan, 1937.
1928. *Catalogue of Novels and Tales by Catholic Writers*. 2nd edition. Dublin: Central Catholic Library Association, 1929, 1930, 1932; London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 1935.
1930. *An Index of Catholic Biographies*. Dublin: Central Catholic Library Association.
1930. *Novels and Tales by Catholic Writers: A Catalogue*. American edition. New York: The America Press; Dublin: Central Catholic Library, 1940, 1946.
1932. *Catholic Mission Literature: A Handlist*. (Catholic Bibliographical series, No. 3). Dublin: Central Catholic Library.
1932. *The Central Catholic Library: The First Ten Years of an Irish Enterprise*. Dublin: Central Catholic Library Association.
1932. *International Relations from a Catholic Standpoint*, by Joseph T. Delos, Marcel Prélôt, Joseph Danel, and others. Translated from the French by Stephen J. Brown. Dublin: Browne and Nolan.
1933. *An Introduction to Catholic Booklore*. London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne.
1935. *Catholic Juvenile Literature: A Classified list*. (With Dermot J. Dargan). London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne.
1935. *International Index of Catholic Biographies*. London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne.
1937. *Libraries and Literature from a Catholic Standpoint*. Dublin: Browne and Nolan.
1937. *The Press in Ireland: A Survey and a Guide*. Dublin: Browne and Nolan; New York: Lemma, 1971.
1938. *Poison and Balm*. Dublin: Browne and Nolan.
1940. *From God to God: An Outline of Life*. Dublin: Browne and Nolan; Milwaukee: Bruce, 1942; London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 1942; New York: Spiritual Book Associates, 1943; Milwaukee: Bruce, 1949.
1942. *Studies in Life: By and Large*. Dublin: Browne and Nolan; Spiritual Book Associates, 1944.
1943. *The Catholic Library Comes of Age, 1922-1943*. Dublin: Central Catholic Library.
1943. *Home to God*. Dublin: Irish Messenger.
1944. *Towards the Realization of God*. Dublin: Browne and Nolan; New York: Spiritual Book Associates; London: Catholic Book Club, 1945.

1945. *A Survey of Catholic Literature*. (With Thomas McDermott). Milwaukee: Bruce, 1949.
1946. *From the Realm of Poetry: An Anthology for the Leaving Certificate and Matriculation (N.U.I.) Examinations*. London: Macmillan.
1952. *In the Byways of Life*. Dublin: Talbot Press; London: Catholic Book Club.
1953. *Emigration from Ireland*. Dublin: The Standard.
1954. *Essays of Contention*. Dublin: Talbot Press.
1955. *The Crusade for a Better World*. Dublin: Irish Messenger Office.
1955. *Image and Truth: Studies in the Imagery of the Bible*. Rome: Officium libri catholici, Catholic Book Agency.
1956. *Alone with God: Meditations for a Retreat*. New York City: Wagner.
1985. *Ireland in Fiction: A Guide to Irish Novels, Tales, Romances and Folklore*. Vol. 2. (With Desmond Clarke). Cork: Royal Carbery Books.

WORKS ABOUT STEPHEN J. BROWN

- Clarke, Desmond J. 1968. "Introduction." Pp. v-vii in *Ireland in Fiction*, by Stephen J. Brown. Facsimile of the 1919 second edition. Shannon: Irish University Press.
- Moran, Catherine. 1998. "Fr. Stephen Brown, S.J.: A Library Life (1881-1962)." MLIS Minor Thesis, School of Library and Information Studies, University College Dublin. [Available at Central Catholic Library Dublin, use contingent on permission from the author. The work includes a substantial bibliography].
- Review of *Ireland in Fiction*. 1916. *Athenaeum*, No. 4601 (January): 32.
- Review of *Ireland in Fiction*. 1916. *Library Association Record* 18 (February): 79.
- Webb, Sidney. 1916. "Ireland in Fiction," *New Statesman* 6 (February 11): 546-547. Reprinted elsewhere in this issue of **SOCIOLOGICAL ORIGINS** (pp. 21-24).

ARCHIVAL DEPOSITS

- Central Catholic Library, Dublin. Holds materials related to Fr. Brown's administration of the Library.
- Irish Jesuit Archives, Dublin. Holds the papers of Fr. Brown (ref. code J54) and an 11-page finding aid has been prepared. The materials include bibliography, a partial inventory of his personal book collection, and correspondence regarding his publications, including his difficulty obtaining approval from the Province Censors to publish *Ireland in Fiction* and other works.

INTERNET RESOURCES

- "Life of Father Brown," from the website of the Central Catholic Library, Dublin, <<http://www.catholiclibrary.ie/brown.htm>> [accessed March 2007].
- "Stephen Brown [Fr.]," from the website of the Princess Grace Irish Library, Monaco. <http://www.pgil-eirdata.org/html/pgil_datasets/authors/b/Brown,S/life.htm> [accessed March 2007].